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Switch on C.I.A. Chief: Gates Praises Webster Despite His Disappointment

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WASHINGTON, March 4 — Robert M. Gates, who might have become Director of Central Intelligence except for the Iran arms affair, said today that he had no regrets about withdrawing his name from consideration even though he thought he would have won Senate confirmation.

But Mr. Gates, a career intelligence officer who expects to stay on as Deputy Director, said in an interview that he and the Central Intelligence Agency welcomed President Reagan's nomination of William H. Webster as Director. Mr. Webster has been head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for the last nine years.

"What Bill Webster brings us is judgment and common sense," Mr. Gates said. "There is an enormous amount of integrity inside this building, personal and institutional, and one of the things that he brings to us is the opportunity to project that integrity out."

'Obviously I'm Disappointed'

Mr. Gates, clearly annoyed at the drubbing he and his agency have taken in recent weeks because of the role they played in the Iran arms affair, called a reporter in to his seventh-floor office this morning, apparently to get some things off his chest.

"Obviously I'm disappointed, having had the opportunity to have the top job, to lose it for reasons totally beyond my control," he said, "but people easily lose perspective; it's not the only thing in the world."

He and others at C.I.A. headquarters today said they were philosophical about having an outsider from a rival agency nominated instead. One C.I.A. colleague privately expressed relief that John G. Tower, the former Republican Senator from Texas, whom he characterized as more combative and volatile, had turned down the offer of the job before the President offered it to Mr. Webster Tuesday. Mr. Tower headed the Presidential review board that investigated the sale of arms to Iran and the reported diversion of some of the profits to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Mr. Gates said he made up his mind

last Sunday night to ask the President to withdraw his nomination a month after it had been submitted because of the trouble a protracted battle for Senate confirmation would have brought both him and the President.

"I felt that the Tower commission report essentially underscored the peripheral role that I played, but I was aware that they couldn't have that confidence," he said, referring to the senators. "It seemed to me that with the President trying to get a fresh start and put this issue behind us and get on with his and the country's agenda, the only decent and honorable thing for me to do was to get out of the way."

He said no one at the White House ever hinted that he should pull out and that his impression was that the Presi-

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dent was still "foursquare behind the nomination," but he said neither Howard H. Baker Jr., the new White House chief of staff, nor Mr. Reagan had tried to talk him out of withdrawing his name when he went to see them on Monday.

Mr. Gates's appearances before the Senate in the last month drew criticism from some subordinates in the agency, who maintained that he had made the C.I.A. look bad, but today some officers said there was a feeling of regret that he had given up the fight because of the political complications of the Iran affair.

What seemed to annoy Mr. Gates more than anything else was the allegation that he and the C.I.A. had tried to cover up the agency's involvement in the affair in their appearances before the Tower commission and Congressional investigating committees.

"The thing that I think people have

difficulty appreciating is how difficult it was to assemble the basic facts about this whole thing," Mr. Gates said, "because there were a lot of things the National Security Council was involved in that we didn't know about."

View of North's Role

Asked what he and his colleagues thought of Lieut. Col. Oliver G. North, the N.S.C. aide who virtually directed the policy of arms sales to Iran to obtain freedom for American hostages in the Middle East, and also apparently put in motion a plan to divert profits from the deals to the rebels in Nicaragua, Mr. Gates laughed.

"I thought I worked hard," he observed. "It's difficult to conceive how Ollie did all that stuff."

Mr. Gates insisted that he had done his best to prepare William J. Casey, who resigned as head of the intelligence agency last month after surgery for a brain tumor, to give a full account in all his Congressional appearances but said he was hampered by a lack of facts.

Mr. Casey, according to those at the C.I.A. who have seen him in recent days, is recuperating at home now and is alert and curious about the issues. But he has some difficulty in speech, particularly in expressing complicated thoughts, associates said. He was said to be saddened by the decision of Mr. Gates, whom he regarded as a protégé, to withdraw his name from consideration as his successor.

"When somebody here would be attacked by name or in the press and be very sensitive to it, Bill couldn't understand that very well," Mr. Gates recalled. "Having been out in the world for his whole life, practically, he was accustomed to the elbows out, rock 'em-sock 'em approach to politics and everything else, and he would say, 'It only hurts for a day.'"

Mr. Gates, a youthful-looking 43, is technically acting director of the C.I.A. but he received his guest in his deputy director's office overlooking the forest preserve that surrounds the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va., just outside of the Capital.

He did not speak for the record about many operational details of the agency's activities in the Iran affair or else-

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where, but a senior intelligence official made the these points:

¶The agency says United States did not try to kill the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, in the bombing raid on Tripoli last April, as reported last month by Seymour M. Hersh in The New York Times Magazine. United States intelligence believes Colonel Qaddafi is constantly on the move, primarily as a precaution against domestic enemies, and nobody knows exactly where he is on any given day.

¶Top officials of the agency will have to do better than Mr. Casey did in dealing with Congress, where he often left members of oversight committees feeling that they would only get the truth on any issue out of him if they asked him precisely the right question. "We are going to have to give them more confidence that we are being up front with them," a senior official said. "They are still skeptical that we are holding back."

¶Most leaks of sensitive intelligence information come out of the executive branch, not from Congress. "There have been a lot of leaks from Congress on Central America," one official said, "but once you get beyond that issue, their record is a lot better than the Administration's."

¶Mr. Casey's departure, and his replacement by Mr. Webster, a man with no foreign operational experience, will not reduce the C.I.A.'s effectiveness in covert operations, activities for which Mr. Casey was believed to have been an enthusiastic advocate. Mr. Gates himself was also considered to have been relatively unexposed to covert operations.

¶The C.I.A.'s inspector-general is investigating the Tower commission's report that some of the agency's field officers were involved in helping Colonel North arrange construction of a private airstrip in Costa Rica to aid the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, but has not yet made his report.

¶Senior C.I.A. officials are unaware of any cooperation between their agency and Colonel North or any other Government agency involved in soliciting private donations for support of the contras, activities detailed in the Tower commission's report.

¶Foreign countries are less disturbed by the contradiction between the stated United States Government counterterrorism policy and the revelations of the Iran affair than the American public. But the C.I.A. believes that the Iran activities were a "wound" on that policy, which has been reaffirmed as it was before the story broke.

In addition, the official said, the C.I.A. now has no involvement in any secret intelligence channels to Iran like those described in the Tower commission's report. "That's the State Department's problem," one official said. "They wanted it, and now they've got it."